

Essays in Education

Volume 14

Article 22

Summer 7-1-2005

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Recommended Citation

Woytek, Amy (2005) "Utilizing Assessment to Improve Student Motivation and Success," *Essays in Education*: Vol. 14 , Article 22.
Available at: <https://openriver.winona.edu/eie/vol14/iss1/22>

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Utilizing Assessment to Improve Student Motivation and Success

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Abstract

The process of classroom assessment can serve an important role in enhancing student motivation and achievement. Teachers can help enhance student performance by sharing clearly defined learning goals. Through student involvement in the assessment process, students learn to take responsibility for their own learning. This feeling of accountability and control may increase the students' intrinsic motivation to learn and can heighten success. Also, teachers have the opportunity to help students succeed through the implementation and communication of quality assessments.

Introduction

What is the purpose of classroom assessment in our schools? Andrew Roberts (2001, ¶ 3) claims that, "the purpose of assessment may be grading people to decide their suitability or readiness for something (such as a job, or the award of a qualification) or it may be to give feedback on their development." For instance, students may be tested to determine if they are prepared to advance to the next grade level or to ascertain their ability in a particular content area. Black and Wiliam (1998) define assessment broadly to include all activities that teachers and students undertake to get information that can be used analytically to alter teaching and learning. This definition considers assessment as an involved practice. Richard Stiggins describes classroom assessment as "the process of gathering evidence of student learning to inform instructional decisions" (2005, p. 5). He also states that for assessment to be effectively utilized, accurate information must be acquired and the assessment should not only reflect student achievement but also enrich student motivation and improve student success (Stiggins, 2005). The diverse nature of classroom assessment creates a challenge in knowledge, in preparation and in effective use by teachers.

Teachers have a professional responsibility to the students to learn and to employ current and best practices in all facets of teaching, including assessment. Taken from the previous, collective definitions from current research, assessment proves to be a multifaceted classroom tool. Teachers must discover, accept and apply this new understanding of classroom assessment to continue to describe achievement and contribute to learning and motivation (Stiggins, 2005, p. 1). This article will explore practical ways in which teachers may specifically use classroom assessments to improve student motivation and achievement.

Setting Students Up for Success

Teachers want their students to learn, to succeed and to achieve. And yet, for many students the learning goals and content of assessments remain vague. Some “teachers mistakenly believe that they must keep their assessments secret” (Guskey, 2003, p. 7). Clouded in ambiguity, students find difficulty reaching for uncertain targets, making achievement a guessing game. One way to minimize the blind search for success, assessments should reflect the knowledge and skills that is taught in class, and this correlation will help students realize that assessments are reasonable evaluation (Guskey, 2003). Stiggins contends simply that students who “internalize valued achievement targets become better performers”(2005, p. 29). Informing students of detailed expectations and specific learning objectives from the beginning of a unit or lesson creates clear, focused goals for students to pursue and jumpstarts them on their way to success.

McMillan (2000, ¶10) states that in order for assessment to be considered fair and ethical, students must know the format of the assessments before lessons begin; they must know “what will be tested, how it will be graded, scoring criteria, anchors, exemplars, and examples of performance.” In addition to providing this information, teachers can prepare students for assessments by giving them opportunities to practice with the format of the assessments. For example, if students will be taking a written essay exam, the teacher can provide the students with sample questions that reflect the quality of exam questions. Furthermore, upon completion of the practice questions, students may be involved with determining grading criteria and applying those criteria to their own work or the work of their peers. By applying these techniques, teachers can take an active role in setting their students up for success.

Assessment Triggers the Motivation-Success Cycle

In addition to sharing learning targets and assessments with students, teachers can enhance student achievement through assessment by providing proof of the student’s success. As soon as pupils realize their own success:

What begins to grow in them is a sense of hopefulness and an expectation of more success in the future. This in turn fuels enthusiasm and the motivation to try hard, which fuels even more success. The basis of this upward spiral is the evidence of their own achievement, which students receive from their teachers based on ongoing classroom assessments. Thus, classroom assessment information is the essential fuel that powers the learning system for students (Stiggins, 2005, p. 19).

Unfortunately, if the students experience failure they are likely to get caught in a descending spiral, which can lead to feelings of disappointment and despair. Black and Wiliam (1998, ¶ 38) review this situation, “the worst scenario is one in which some

pupils who get low marks this time also got low marks last time and come to expect to get low marks next time. This cycle of repeated failure becomes part of a shared belief between such students and their teacher.” Obviously, the teacher’s goal is to initiate the cycle of motivation and success.

Involving Students in Assessment

One method teachers can instigate this positive motivation-success cycle is to involve students in the process of assessment. Countless ways exist from which teachers can choose to include students in assessment. One instance is presented in the determination of learning or achievement targets. The bulk of responsibility for creating these targets rests in the hands of the teacher, usually guided by school, district and/or state standards. As mentioned previously, communicating these goals is one practical way of enhancing achievement. In addition, students can collaborate with the teacher to develop some additional desired outcomes of learning. For instance, the teacher may include goals directed toward student interests. “If students play even a small role in setting the (learning achievement) target...we can gain considerable motivational and therefore achievement, benefits” (Stiggins, 2005, p.244). By becoming involved with the desired outcomes of learning, students gain motivation to learn.

Another technique that can be used to engage students in assessment and to increase motivation is to “help students learn to reflect on and see their own improvement as achievers” (Stiggins, 2005, p. 322). Keeping learning logs or receiving frequent updates from the teacher can raise student awareness of progress. When students and teachers engage in conversation about assessment, this encourages students to consider their own cognition, which aids in the learning process (Black and Wiliam, 1998). The motivation-success cycle will continue if students witness and reflect on their growth toward learning goals.

Students may also learn to recognize and track their improvement by participating in self-assessment. Stiggins comments that understanding how to evaluate one’s work can initiate students’ understanding of the connections between evaluation and achievement and can strengthen student performance (2005). Through careful, teacher guidance and practice students can become effective judges of their own work. Further research shows that when students understand and apply self-assessment skills their achievement increases (Black and Wiliam, 1998) and that self-assessments play a significant role in increasing students’ motivation to learn (Ho, 2003). Through self-evaluation, students directly observe their own improvement and therefore are more motivated to achieve.

Students Take Responsibility for Their Own Learning

By involving students in the assessment process, teachers encourage students to create a sense of internal responsibility for their achievement. Stiggins remarks that students “must take responsibility for developing their own sense of control over their success” (2005, p. 296). This in turn leads to greater motivation and greater academic

success. “If learners do not also develop the capability of directing their own learning and acting on the world around them, they will be only partially educated, and limited in what they can do” (Hammond & Collins, as cited in Wongsri, Cantwell & Archer, 2002, ¶ 1).

In order for students to be fully absorbed in learning the student and teacher must create a partnership in accomplishing learning goals. Stiggins gives an example of how teachers can support students in this process:

You (teacher) would share decision-making power to bring students into their learning as full partners, teaching them how to gauge their own success. In short, you would strive to establish in your students an internal locus of control over their own academic well-being. If they participate, they benefit, and they know this is going on (2005, p. 288)

The greater responsibility a student feels toward his or her achievement, the stronger the desire will be to put forth the effort needed to reach learning targets. Students also perform with greater conviction and with an anticipation of achievement if they feel accountable for their own learning (Ertmer, & Newby; Shin, as cited in Heo). This reinforces the idea that student engagement in assessment fuels the drive towards achievement.

Using Quality Assessments

In addition to involving students in assessment, teachers boost student success by creating authentic, quality assessments. Teachers and students can only gain accurate knowledge of achievement through quality assessments. Valid and reliable assessments will clearly show the teacher and student what knowledge and skills have been learned. From these results further learning can be initiated, whether that means re-teaching or setting new learning goals.

Black and Wiliam (1998, ¶ 32) contend that quality assessment are “tasks to be justified in terms of the learning aims that they serve, and they can work well only if opportunities for pupils to communicate their evolving understanding are built into the planning.” In addition to these qualities, Stiggins claims that quality assessments must “sample student achievement appropriately and eliminate distortion of results due to bias” (2005, p. 28). Without these qualities, assessments may misrepresent the student’s actual knowledge or skill level. By determining exactly what students have learned and not learned, assessments benefit both teachers and students.

“When teachers’ classroom assessments become an integral part of the instructional process and a central ingredient in their efforts to help students learn, the benefits of assessment for both students and teachers will be boundless” (Guskey, 2003, p. 6). McMillan (2000) also discusses the importance of a teacher’s ability to integrate assessment and classroom instruction claiming that it gives the teachers clues as to what lessons and level of teaching that may be appropriate. In order for teachers to take full

advantage of assessments they must be open and willing to view them as achievement gauges, student motivators, and instructional guides.

Communicating Results/Feedback

The results of these quality assessments must then be effectively communicated to the student in order for continued success. “Teachers facilitate learning by providing students with important feedback on their learning progress and by helping them identify learning problems” (Bloom, Madaus, & Hastings; Stiggins, as cited in Guskey, 2003, p. 7). Simply returning a test to a student with a letter grade on top does not give the student any indication on what improvements need to be made or what concepts may be misunderstood. “The way in which test results are reported to pupils so that they can identify their own strengths and weaknesses is critical. Pupils must be given the means and opportunities to work with evidence of their difficulties” (Black and Wiliam, 1998, ¶ 38). Here assessment is viewed as a self-reflective learning tool for students and an opportunity for teachers to present experiences for learning improvement. Black and Wiliam (1998, ¶ 36) add that “feedback to any pupil should be about the particular qualities of his or her work, with advice on what he or she can do to improve, and should avoid comparisons with other pupils.” Through communication of assessment results, teachers can take the opportunity to show sensitivity toward the students. The teacher can also encourage the students to further their development and challenge themselves to gain greater understanding.

Assessment should no longer be viewed as merely a device to determine learning achievement. A variety of options exist within the process of assessment that can influence student motivation and achievement. When students and teachers enter into an assessment partnership, they become a team with clearly defined, mutual learning goals and specific assessment tasks. As teachers begin to implement new strategies for using assessment as an instructional device, they will recognize the ability of students to take control of their own success and accept responsibility for their own learning. These empowering feelings will inspire and motivate students toward greater achievement.

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